

ZEST

Romance on the menu

By Greg Morago

Valentine's Day is the restaurant industry's time to shine. And to play Cupid. Restaurants known for their romantic atmosphere gear up to welcome another day where love (of the passion and culinary kind) rules. Sure, there are some frequent diners who say that Valentine's Day isn't the best opportunity to experience a top-tier restaurant. But try telling that to anyone

who has ever gotten engaged over a Valentine's Day dinner and they'd beg to differ.

Houston is full of beautiful restaurants boasting intimate settings, soft lighting, and sensuous food and drink. But here are 10 places that put their best forward on the lovers' holiday. In alphabetical order:

BCN Taste & Tradition: The walls sport original works by Picasso and Miro. The waitstaff wears Zara suits. The food is plated with an artist's eye. Yes, BCN is special in so many ways. This low-slung Montrose bungalow with only 50 seats sports a hushed, monochromatic elegance. Spanish chef Luis Roger is sending out gorgeously spare plates of Cantabrian Sea anchovies, grilled Spanish octopus with smoked paprika, grilled wild branzino with avocado and mayonnaise foam, and Segovia-style suckling pig with apples. Don't go to this Spanish restaurant expecting tapas and paella. Do go, however, expecting excellent service, a proud Spanish wine list, excellent gin and tonic cocktails, and an adult, romantically subdued atmosphere. BCN is not open on Sunday, so start your Valentine's Day early with a reservation on days leading up to Cupid's day.

BCN Taste & Tradition, 4210 Roseland, 832-834-3411; bcnhouston.com

Brennan's of Houston: Class, sautéed in class and smothered in more class. That's Brennan's in a praline-coated nutshell. For four decades, this regal restaurant from a New Orleans' dynasty has served Houston. That means sumptuous dining rooms overseen by caring eyes; impeccable manners and service; and a menu of rich, Creole classicism punctuated by inventive, modern know-how. Under chef Danny Trace, Brennan's menu soothes tradition-minded palates while exciting a new generation of in-the-know foodies.

For Valentine's Day, Brennan's is offering a \$75 prix fixe dinner menu that includes goodies such as wood-grilled oysters, foie gras with Satsuma marmalade, crawfish-stuffed Texas flounder, and pecan-crusted speckled trout. And because it's Brennan's, expect lagniappes. The love is free, too.

Brennan's of Houston, 3300 Smith, 713-522-9711; brennanshouston.com

Damian's Cucina Italiana: There's something to be said about Old World manners and Gulf Coast hospitality. That's what you get at this exceedingly welcoming standard-bearer of good taste and tradition in Midtown. Damian's is where you want to bring your parents when they come to visit; impress a lady on a first date; show off a little when you're marking a milestone birthday or anniversary. And sometimes it's simply the place to go when you want a big plate of mamma mia spaghetti and meatballs. The dining room invites with dark woods and murals of pastoral campagna. Order a nice bottle of red wine and tuck into dishes such as Veal Marsala, Shrimp Damian, Lasagna Bolognese and Chicken Parm. It doesn't get better than



Seafood risotto with mussels, clams, scallop, shrimp, salmon and basil lobster sauce from La Table

Debora Small



Kiran's Indian restaurant's jumbo prawns



Profiteroles at Etoile cuisine et bar

James Nielsen / Houston Chronicle



The Pass & Provision's mushroom truffle purée



Brennan's restaurant's duck dish with sausage and dirty rice

Houston Chronicle file



Tony's Spinach Orecchiette

Houston Chronicle file

this. The restaurant is offering a three-course Valentine's Day menu from 5 to 10 p.m. for \$59.99 per person.

Damian's Cucina Italiana, 3011 Smith, 713-522-0439; damians.com

Etoile Cuisine et Bar: OK, so you were too busy to book you and your lover's flight to Paris to dine at that bistro where you made googly eyes at each other over pinot noir and steak frites. No worries; jump in your car and head to Uptown Park for a coveted seat at Etoile. This shining star of a restaurant from chef Philippe Verpiand is a slice of the Seine on the bayou. The menu of classic dishes includes beef tartare, escargots Bourguignonne, cassoulet, sole amandine, steak au poivre with peppercorn-cognac sauce, duck à l'orange, and Houston's best profiteroles. Etoile is offering a three-course Valentine's Day dinner on Saturday and Sunday for \$74 per person, as well as a three-course brunch on Sunday for \$45 per person.

Etoile Cuisine et Bar, 1101-11 Uptown Park, 832-668-5808;

etoilecuisine.com

Kiran's: Indian chef Kiran Verma has elevated the art of fine dining in Houston. Want to feel like a grown-up? Want to experience artful, beautifully accomplished food? Want to indulge in sensory pleasures in a boutique setting? Then get yourself to this special, romantic restaurant and let Verma fuss over you. For three nights (Friday through Sunday) she's setting out a prix fixe candlelight dinner that starts with strawberry soup with mascarpone, then moves to a first course of salmon carpaccio with pink peppercorns or piquillo peppers stuffed with mozzarella and paneer. Second course is a choice of foie gras with fig chutney and caviar or paneer kebab with pomegranate salad. Main course choices include tandoor-roasted rack of lamb; stuffed fillet of cod; or eggplant papillote. End the meal with a coffee cognac cocktail and spiced chocolate truffles. Such a lovers' meal is \$95 per person; reservations a must.

Kiran's, 4100 Westheimer, 713-960-8472;

kiranshouston.com

La Table: There's something extraordinary and wonderful going on at 1800 Post Oak. The former Philippe Restaurant + Lounge morphed into Table on Post Oak and then again transformed into La Table. Under Alexandre Gaudelet, the CEO of Invest Hospitality (the investment firm hired to manage the restaurant), La Table has quietly become one of the most fabulous places to dine in Houston that includes an Assouline bookstore and a new breakfast/bake shop/coffee bar called Macarons. But it's the plush, romantic dining room with a menu under the direction of chef Manuel Pucha that delights with its easy charms. For Valentine's Day the restaurant will offer a family-style brunch from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. on Sunday that is \$59 for adults, \$29 for children. Additionally, La Table also will offer a four-course Valentine's Day Dinner with signature dishes; \$95 per person.

La Table, 1800 Post Oak, 713-439-1000; latablehouston.com

Mark's American Cuisine: When they

say Mark's is a temple of Houston fine dining, they're not kidding. About the fine dining or the temple. Housed in a renovated 1920s church with gold ceilings, the stunning, intimate restaurant is at the top of anyone's list of romantic dining in Houston. Like a long, slow kiss, chef Mark Cox is stretching out his Valentine's Day menu to four days beginning Thursday and continuing through Sunday. The first three days the three-course meal (priced at \$84.95 per person) offers starters such as Dungeness crab with fingerling potatoes; lobster and potato gnocchi; and smoked salmon and lobster. Dinner options include 12-spice duck breast and confit leg; steak and gnocchi with truffle Madeira sauce; roasted Chilean bass over sticky seafood rice; or roasted bison and rack of venison. On Sunday the restaurant will be open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. for a rare multi-course, prix fixe Sunday brunch priced at \$64.95 for adults and \$24.95 for children, plus tax and gratuity. Reservations required.

Mark's American Cuisine, 1658 Westheimer, 713-523-3800; marks1658.com

Rainbow Lodge: Long regarded as one of the city's most unique and special occasion options, this historic, century-old log cabin is big on charm. The décor is hunting lodge chic (mounted trophy heads and antique fishing collectibles paired with heavy linens and sparkling chandeliers) and the menu brims with elegant presentations of wild game and Gulf seafood. The restaurant boasts a new chef (Mark Schmidt) and one of the city's best sommeliers (Marc Borel). This year the restaurant will offer a four-course Valentine's Day menu for \$89 per person plus tax and gratuity. The dinner, which includes a complimentary glass of bubbles, includes an entrée choice of pan roasted red snapper, or grilled beef tenderloin, or ancho chile-rubbed venison medallions, or butter-poached lobster. Reservations are highly recommended.

Rainbow Lodge, 2011 Ella Blvd, 713-861-8666; rainbow-lodge.com

The Pass: They say one is such a lonely number. That's because there can only be one victor at the top of the heap. And in Houston Chronicle restaurant critic Alison Cook's book, that pinnacle restaurant is The Pass. The No. 1 restaurant in Cook's annual list of the 100 best restaurants in Houston, The Pass is co-chef Seth Siegel-Gardner's and Terrence Gallivan's singular vision of fine dining: a dazzling, dizzying, multi-course menu that's equal parts culinary mastery and food wizardry. Although The Pass is normally closed on Sunday, it will be open for dinner on Valentine's Day. Sorry, but the restaurant already is fully committed (try another night, we implore you). But the Provisions side of this two-restaurants-under-one-roof enterprise called The Pass & Provisions is serving a \$75 prix fixe menu.

The Pass & Provisions, 807 Taft, 713-628-9020; passandprovisions.com

Tony's: There really is no other restaurant in Houston like Tony's. Tony and Donna Vallone preside over a dining room that's alive with art; filled with the city's boldface names; drenched in impeccable manners; and fairly exploding with innovative food thanks to hot-shot young chef Kate McLean. Tony's found its way to the No. 5 spot on Chronicle restaurant critic Alison Cook's Top 100 list of Houston restaurants. For good reason. From the tables set with white linens and lush roses to the menu of impeccable pastas and chops to the indulgent wine list, Tony's is a top shelf experience made even more special by flawless service. This year's Valentine's Day dinner promises an indulgent four-course affair with three seatings on Sunday: 5:30 p.m. for \$85; 7:15 p.m. for \$135; 9:30 p.m. for \$85.

Tony's, 3755 Richmond, 713-622-6778; tonyhouston.com

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